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**"TWO GIFTS ARE BETTER THAN ONE":
MARY AS MOTHER OF CHRIST
AND MOTHER OF ALL GRACES IN FIFTEENTH-
CENTURY POPULAR SERMONS**

*Donna Spivey Ellington**

In one of his Christmas sermons, Jean Gerson, chancellor of the University of Paris, poses a question for his hearers: "Was the greatest grace and the greatest gift which God bestowed on Our Lady his granting that she should be his mother?" Immediately answering his own question, Gerson declares, "I reply in the negative, that Our Lady would much prefer to be the mother of God spiritually, by grace and by charity, than to be his bodily mother without grace and without charity. Nevertheless, the two gifts together were better than one alone."¹

Since St. Augustine of Hippo, it had been the custom to assert the primacy of Mary's faith in God, her trust that she would be the mother of the Son of God, over her physical conception of him in her womb.² Gerson was of course aware of this tradition and in a sermon on Mary's nativity given at

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¹Jean Gerson, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. P. Glorieux (8 vols.; Paris: Desclée and Cie, 1971), 7:958. "Je respon que nennil et que Nostre Dame devoit mieulx amer estre mere de Dieu espirituellement par grace et par charité que estre mere de luy corporellement sans grace et sans charité; toutesfoys les deux dons ensemble furent meilleurs que l'un tout par luy."

²Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion* (2 vols.; New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), 1:96. In one of his sermons, Augustine explains the text of Matthew 12:46-50 by saying that Mary's conception of the body of Christ would have been of no use if she had not first conceived him by faith.

Constance, he specifically cited St. Augustine as an authority for this view.³ When considering the Virgin as the mother of graces, however, there were, by the fifteenth century, two other issues of at least equal importance. First, whatever significance her faith might have had, no one could disagree that Mary had become the supreme intercessor and mediatrix, the neck of the body of Christ,⁴ because of her bodily conception of the Christ Child, her willingness to be the means by which the Word-made-Flesh entered into the world. There may be many saints on whom one could call, but none could equal the unique position held by the Virgin Mother of God. Medieval preachers were unanimous in their assertions that Mary's powerful intercession stemmed from the close relationship that she had with Jesus as his mother.

The second consideration is that, by the late Middle Ages, the Virgin's bodily conception of Jesus was not only proclaimed as the origin of her role as mediatrix, but had become the underlying theme for all aspects of Marian devotion. Because Jesus had taken his flesh from the body of Mary, from her "very pure blood,"⁵ mother and son were understood to share a mystical unity that allowed Mary to participate in all aspects of Jesus' life. This unity enabled her especially to suffer with Jesus on the cross; and it made her ultimately the source of the most revered sacrament of the Church, the body of Christ, present in the Eucharistic host.

There was certainly no more eloquent defender of Mary's importance as the source of Jesus' humanity than Gerson himself. Indeed, as the quotation above reveals, while he had no

³Gerson, *Oeuvres complètes*, 5:344. "Fac nascatur in nobis per gratiam Jesus qui vocatur Christus quemadmodum prius in te natus est per fidem et amorem, dicente Augustine."

⁴Bernardino of Siena, *Opera omnia*, ed. P. M. Perantoni (5 vols.; Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1950-), 2:157. "Cum enim Christus sit caput nostrum, a quo omnis influxus divinae gratiae in mysticum corpus fluit, beata Virgo est collum, per quod hic fluxus pertransit ad corporis membra." San Bernardino was only one of a number of preachers to use this metaphor. See Graef, *Mary*, 1:234, 245-47, 255.

⁵Donna Spivey Ellington, *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul: Understanding Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 47-51.

intention of overthrowing the traditional interpretation of so exalted an authority as St. Augustine, he nevertheless could not resist adding that the Virgin's physical motherhood was a special gift from God which served to enhance significantly the gifts she received through her faith alone. Mary is, for Gerson, the "precious sacred temple,"⁶ "the place where the bread of life, the bread of the angels was made and formed."⁷ She is the fruit tree, the source of the fruit which refreshes us in the sacrament.⁸ And in one of the loveliest and most poetic passages in all of his sermons, Gerson portrays Mary as a temple both of sacrifice and of nuptial celebration at the Annunciation:

Today, the first sacrifice or offering for our salvation was made within the sacred temple of the womb of Our Lady. And this offering was accepted by the whole Trinity for our redemption. In this sacred temple, in this worthy and honored chamber of Our Lady, the wedding feast of the divine with our humanity was celebrated. . . . The Holy Spirit celebrated the wedding and Our Lady gave and ministered the materials and the place. She is the hostess . . . the gifts, the dishes of all the virtues are there set forth fully and without measure; and the Holy Spirit is likewise given without measure. And every creature who desires devotedly to make use of these gifts is still seated at this banquet and nourished from this fullness.⁹

Mary's body here becomes both an altar of sacrifice, as the divine humbles himself to become human, and a dining chamber,

⁶Gerson, *Oeuvres complètes*, 7:540. "N'est lieu ou monde ne en ciel ne en terre ou plus merveilleux ouvrage fust oncquez fait ne plus digne que dedens le precieux temple sacré de Nostre Dame."

⁷Gerson, *Oeuvres complètes*, 7:699. "Si recorrons a vous, Vierge glorieuse, pour ceste grace empestrer, qui estes celle en laquelle fut fait et forme ce pain de vie le pain des anges, et vous saluerons en disant: Ave gratia plena, etc."

⁸Gerson, *Oeuvres complètes*, 7:659. " . . . l'arbre aussi devons grandeent louer, c'est la Vierge Marie qui a parte tel fruit de quoy nous avons este refectionnes . . . "

⁹Gerson, *Oeuvres complètes*, 7:540. "Ad ce jour fu faicte la premiere oblation ou offre pour nostre salut dedens le sacré temple du ventre Nostre Dame. Et fut acceptee ceste oblation par toute la Trinité pour nostre redemption. En ce temple sacré, en ceste sale digne et honoree de Nostre Dame, furent celebrees les nopces de la Divinité avecquez nostre humanité. . . . le Saint Esprit celebre les nopces et Nostre Dame donne et ministre la matiere et le lieu; elle est hostesse . . . les dons, les metz de toutes vertus y sont pleinement et sans mesure espanduz: datus est spiritus non ad mensuram. Et de ceste plenitude et du relief est assasiee encours et nourrye especialment chascune creature qui devement en veult user."

in which all of the virtues and graces of the incarnate God are presented for the first time as nourishment for the faithful.

Gerson was, in fact, so captivated by the importance of having a bodily connection to Christ that in a sermon on Mary's Nativity given at Constance, in which he considers whether St. Joseph might have been preserved from actual sin by sanctification in the womb, he attempts to make a physical connection between St. Joseph and Jesus. Even within a chaste marriage such as that of Mary and Joseph, Gerson argues that there is between husband and wife a "mutual translation of bodies," allowing him to declare with "sober understanding" that Jesus was conceived from the body and flesh of Joseph. The language he uses is very cautious and hedged with warnings against misunderstanding, but his desire to magnify St. Joseph by giving him a bodily role in the humanity of Jesus is nonetheless astonishing.¹⁰

Other preachers were not likely to follow Gerson in this kind of speculation, but there was certainly agreement with him that the Virgin's power to dispense the graces of Christ is derived from the common flesh which they share as mother and son. The two Franciscans, San Bernardino of Siena and Bernardino of Busti, both proclaim the centrality of Mary's motherhood. San Bernardino asserts that, just as the humanity of Christ transcends every rank of God's creatures, the rank of his mother is conformed to Christ as a man. Her dignity as his mother surpasses that of all of the creatures of the universe because it could be given to no other. "Therefore the Church says to the Virgin: ' . . . the one whom the heavens cannot contain, you have borne in your womb.'"¹¹ He argues elsewhere that no grace descends from God to us unless it comes first through the hands of the Virgin, a privilege she obtained from the moment she conceived the Christ Child in her womb. At that

¹⁰Gerson, *Oeuvres complètes*, 5:357. "Et in hac quidem nativitate sola Maria materiam ministravit. At vero quia corpus Mariae fuit ipsius Joseph jure matrimoniale quo fit mutua translatio corporum viri ad mulierem et e contra, videamus si cum intelligentiae sobrietate dicere fas nobis sit quod ex corpore et carne Joseph natus est Jesus Christus. Et hoc dici forsitan posset nisi piarum aurium timeretur offensio."

¹¹Bernardino of Siena, *Opera omnia*, 2:387.

point she received a "jurisdiction or authority over every temporal procession of the Holy Spirit." San Bernardino continues his explanation, saying:

For since the totality of the divine nature, all divine being, power, knowledge and will, rested in the enclosed womb of the Virgin, I am not afraid to say that this Virgin has a certain jurisdiction over the flow of all graces, from whose womb, as from a divine ocean, the rivers and streams of all graces flow. . . . Jesus is no more truly called Son of God than he is called the Son of the Virgin; neither greater, nor less, nor more worthy is the Son of God sitting on the paternal throne, clothed with the brightness which he had before the world was made, than wrapped in an infants' swaddling clothes lying in a manger on the hay. And because she is the mother of the Son of God who produces the Holy Spirit, therefore all the gifts, virtues and graces of his Holy Spirit . . . are administered through her hands.¹²

Bernardino of Busti, citing St. Bernard of Clairvaux, says that,

The Blessed Virgin administered all the works of mercy toward her son. For she clothed him with her virginal flesh, fed him by giving him milk from heaven. Provided hospitality by carrying him nine months in her womb and throughout his infancy not only visited him but offered every office of humility to him.¹³

This is why God wishes to give to us all good things through Mary. Bernardino chose to cite a passage from St. Bernard of Clairvaux which obviously highlighted the numerous ways in

¹²Bernardino of Siena, *Opera omnia*, 2:379. "Cum enim tota natura divina, totum esse, posse, scire et velle divinum intra Virginis uterum exstiterit clausum, non timeo dicere quod omnium gratiarum effluxus quamdam iurisdictionem habuit haec Virgo, de cuius utero, quasi de quodam divinitatis oceano, rivi et flumina emanabant omnium gratiarum. . . . quod Iesus non dicatur verius filius Dei quam filius Virginis; nec maior, nec minor, nec dignior est Dei Filius in throno paterno sedens, vestitus claritate, quam habuit antequam mundus fieret, quam pannis pauperibus involutus et intra faenum in praesepio reclinatus. Et quia talis est mater Filii Dei, qui producit Spiritum Sanctum, ideo omnia dona, virtutes et gratiae ipsius Spiritus Sancti, . . . per manus ipsius administrantur."

¹³Bernardino of Busti, *Martiale* (Milan: Leonardus Pachel, 1493), Sermon 1, "On the Name of Mary," pt. 2. This edition of Busti's work has no page numbers. References will provide the sermon number, the larger division of the work in which the sermon is found, and the part of the sermon in which the cited passage occurs.

which the flesh of Mary and that of her son were joined. In many ways, the Marian sermons of St. Bernard, given in the twelfth century, provide a foretaste of the themes that would come to dominate the late Middle Ages and they were a constant source of inspiration for late medieval preachers.

Dominican Gabriel Barletta was no less prepared to support the Franciscans. After citing St. Thomas Aquinas who said that the closer one is to the principal cause of something, the more one participates in the effects of the principle, Barletta argues,

The Virgin Mary was nearer to God than all creatures, because from her the body of Christ was formed, from the very pure blood of the Virgin Mary. He who was the son of God is called the son of Mary. . . . Because, therefore, she was above all others closest to Christ, she has graces above all.¹⁴

Let the sinner sweetly rejoice that through Mary he obtains remission of sins. . . . Let the Son of God rejoice that he took flesh from her.¹⁵

It is the mystery of the Word made flesh in the womb of the Virgin, the direct result of her "Fiat" at the Annunciation, which was at the heart of all late medieval proclamations of her role in the ongoing salvation of sinners. Even so, there is also another incident in Mary's life which has often figured prominently in discussions of her power as intercessor and mother of graces: it is her presence at the foot of the cross where she is often depicted standing to the left of Jesus, an appropriate place to intercede for those sinners who will be placed on Jesus' left at the last judgment.¹⁶ There are several

¹⁴Gabriel Barletta, *Sermones quadragesimales et de sanctis* (Brescia: Jacobus Britannicus, 1497), 71r. "Maria virgo fuit deo propinquissima super omnes creaturas: quia ex ea corpus Christi formatum est: ex purissimis sanguinibus virginis marie. Et qui erat filius dei: dicitur filius Marie. . . . Quia ergo fuit super omnes proxima christo: super omnes gratias habet."

¹⁵Barletta, *Sermones quadragesimales*, 63r. "Gaudeat dulciter peccator quod per mariam remissionem peccatorum obtinuit. . . . Gaudeat filius dei quod per eam carnem de ea assumpsit." See also 72r. Barletta adapts a statement from Colossians 2:9, regarding Christ, to say of Mary, "In nullo enim alio habitavit plenitudo divinitate corporaliter quemadmodum in Maria."

¹⁶Bernardino of Siena, *Opera omnia*, 2:246. San Bernardino attributes this idea to Alexander of Hales. "Sed qua parte stabat Virgo Maria iuxta crucem? Utique ad sinistram Christi, secundum Alexandrum de Hales, scilicet ut pro peccatoribus filium exoraret, qui a sinistris Domini sunt."

reasons for the centrality of Mary's presence at the cross. Traditionally, and perhaps most popularly, Jesus' words entrusting his mother to the care of St. John¹⁷ have been interpreted to mean that Mary has now become the mother of all the faithful, symbolized by the beloved disciple, an approach to the text which was offered by St. Ambrose of Milan.¹⁸ From the fourth century also came another implication of Jesus' concern for his mother, the emphasis on virginity. In a "Letter to the Virgins," St. Athanasius argued that Mary's perpetual virginity was proved by the fact that Jesus gave her into the care of John, another virgin, rather than to his other relatives.¹⁹ Of greatest importance in the late Middle Ages, however, was the Virgin's ability to suffer with her son as he hung on the cross. Her participation in Jesus' pain becomes one of the primary reasons given for Mary's right to intercede for sinners from heaven; and, in many cases, preachers use Mary's experience of pain at the cross to once again highlight the special qualities of her body and her ability to experience through it the suffering of her son. Several preachers actually manage to combine these last two themes, suggesting that the profound experience shared by Jesus and Mary at Calvary was derived from the "common" virginal flesh which they shared.

San Bernardino of Siena and Bernardino of Busti echo at times the conventional interpretation. For San Bernardino, Jesus' words to his mother are proof that even in the midst of his suffering on the cross, he was thinking of the needs of sinners and seeking to provide for them. Sinners should know that in this "maternal recommendation" the Virgin has been established as advocate, and that the first to benefit from the healing remedy of her intercession was the disciple whom Jesus loved. Citing the theological axiom that grace completes and perfects nature, San Bernardino proclaims that Mary, the Mother of Grace and Mother of Mercy, has taken the place of Eve, the mother of our corrupt nature; and as John had Mary

¹⁷John 19:26-27.

¹⁸Graef, *Mary*, 1:84-85.

¹⁹Graef, *Mary*, 1:52.

Salome as his natural mother, he now has the Virgin as his mother in grace.²⁰

For Bernardino of Busti, Jesus' words from the cross represent "an imperial decree, spoken by the Celestial Emperor standing in the tribunal of the cross." Christ's words, "Behold your son," were "as if he said 'I assign for you all sons that might exist who would wish to be devoted to you and reverence you and those who might salute and venerate you as mother.' And therefore she is not able to reject us as her sons, but is compelled by maternal duty to console us."²¹

The focus on virginity begun by St. Athanasius also finds its way into the Passion sermons of a number of late medieval preachers including Jean Gerson, John Brevicoxa, Michel Menot and Olivier Maillard. Gerson is certain that Jesus' words to Mary and John were intended by the Lord to demonstrate the importance of virginity and chastity.²² Brevicoxa states also that Jesus' trust in John was due to the singular merit which was his as a virgin.²³ Menot concludes that Mary was given to

²⁰Bernardino of Siena, *Opera omnia*, 2:246-248. "Mutatur hic maternitas et filiatio ex auctoritate verborum Christi in cruce pendentis; propterea natura transit in gratiam, et gratia nobilitat profecto naturam, non quod una in alteram commutetur, sed quia natura ex gratia perficiatur. Mala mulier Heva corruptae naturae; bona mulier Maria mater gratiae, mater misericordiae. Datur mater gratiae pro matre naturae."

²¹Bernardino of Busti, *Mariale*, Sermon 1, "On the Coronation of Mary," pt. 3. "Imperator enim celestis stans in tribunali crucis nos adoptavit in filios matris sue dicens ei de quolibet nostrum: Ecce filius tuus quasi diceret. Assigno quod tibi sint filii omnes qui voluerint esse tui devoti et te reverenter fient matrem salutare et venerari. Et ideo ipsa nos filios suos non potest refutare, sed cogitur materna pietate consolari."

²²Gerson, *Oeuvres complètes*, 7:508.

²³Jean Courtecuisse, *L'Oeuvre oratoire française de Jean Courtecuisse*, ed. Giuseppe de Stefano (Torino: G. Giappichelli, 1969), 409. The editor of this collection, Giuseppe de Stefano, points out (27) that one section of Courtecuisse's sermon on the Passion, "O vos," (406-408, lines 2099-2170) is identical to a passage in Gerson's famous Passion sermon, "Ad deum vadit." It is a section dealing with the Virgin's lament at the cross. See Gerson, *Oeuvres complètes*, 7:505-506. Stefano states that is not known whether both men were drawing on a common vernacular tradition or whether one borrowed from the other. Stefano does not point out that both men also give the same reason for Jesus' referring to Mary as "woman" rather than as "mother." The word "mother" is filled with such tenderness that had Jesus used it, the virgin would have died of her grief. See Courtecuisse, 409 and Gerson, 7:508. The same explanation is used by Olivier Maillard, "Passio domini nostri Jesu Christi," pt. 4. Maillard cites St. Bernard of Clairvaux for this idea.

John's care because the treasure of her virginity should only be guarded by another virgin.²⁴

It was Olivier Maillard, however, who demonstrated the greatest interest in the particular privileges and graces bestowed on the bodies of those who had retained their virginity, and, for Maillard, this included of course, Jesus himself. In his Passion sermon, Maillard not only repeats the emphasis that both Mary and John were virgins,²⁵ but also, long before describing the crucifixion itself, he highlights the special nature which Mary and Jesus share because of their virginal state. When Jesus is preparing to depart for Jerusalem, his mother in her fear for him, tries to convince him to stay. But Mary finally realizes that Jesus must leave her to fulfill the Father's will, and in her resignation to the inevitable, she draws on the words both of her son and of Ruth, the Old Testament daughter-in-law of Naomi. Mary says to Jesus, "The will of God and your will be done. I ask you that where you will go, I might go, and where you will die, I might die." It is Maillard's comment which piques the greatest interest. In his own commentary on the scene, he calls to his hearers, "O sinners, what was possible between those two virginal bodies?"²⁶ Maillard's emphasis on virginity in this sermon serves to link together the two favorite medieval themes regarding Mary and her role at the cross: her virginity and that of Jesus, and the fact that her virginal motherhood of Jesus will give her a unique ability to participate in his suffering and death. Maillard continues a bit later,

Then Jesus embraced the Virgin Mary in his virginal arms, and the Blessed Virgin said to her son, "It will soon be the twenty-fifth of March, the day on which I conceived you. At least for the honor of that day, I have wished that I might dine with you and hear you speak before you go." Christ answered, "You and I will soon be in a harsh cathedral where I will preach,

²⁴Michel Menot, *Sermons choïsts de Michel Menot*, ed. J. Nève (Bibliothèque du XVe siècle, 29; Paris: E. Champion, 1924), 515.

²⁵Olivier Maillard, "Passio domini nostri Jesu Christi," in *Sermones quadragesimales* (Paris: Antoine Caillaut, 1498), pt. 3. Citing St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Maillard says "Erant ibi duo virgines flentes scilicet Maria et Johannes. Et Christus virginem virginem commendavit dicens. Ecce mater tua etc."

²⁶Maillard, "Passio domini nostri Jesu Christi," pt. 1: "O peccatores quid potuit esse inter illa duo corpora virginea?"

and I will say words that I have never said before, and we will eat together at one most cruel table, where there will be no one but the two of us, it will be the table of the cross.²⁷

In asserting that there will be only the two of them at the "table of the cross," Maillard appears to argue that even with the presence of St. John and the others at the crucifixion, the virginal mother and son will share an experience so absorbing and particular to them that no one else may intrude upon it. And so, at least for Maillard, even the emphasis on virginity in the Passion serves to delineate a unique ability of Mary to participate bodily in Jesus' suffering. The two share not only a common flesh and humanity, but also a common virginal flesh.

Indeed many late medieval preachers were convinced that the intense suffering of Jesus himself was due to the tender nature of his body, drawn from that of Mary. San Bernardino depicts the horrible effects of the crucifixion on the body of Jesus, its "virginal brightness completely discolored." He exclaims, "O flesh of a most beloved youth, artfully conceived from the purest womb of the Virgin Mother, how torn and mangled."²⁸ The same is true of Michel Menot who emphasizes that the sacrifice of Jesus' body was particularly powerful because it was virginal and immaculate flesh. When describing the agony of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemani, Menot says that while it is not usual for people to sweat blood, Christ's body was different. "The body of Christ was most excellently constituted because it was also formed from the pure blood of the Virgin and was therefore very tender."²⁹ And in the late Middle Ages, there was no hesitation, unlike that of earlier periods,

²⁷Maillard, "Passio domini nostri Jesu Christi," pt. 1: "Tunc brachia virginea Jesu Christi amplexata sunt virginem Mariam et dixit beata virgo filio suo, Erit cras 25, in qua te concepisti: saltem ad honorem illius diei quod prandeam simul vobiscum et audiam sermonem vestrum antequam discedatis. Respondit Christus, Ego et vos cras erimus in dura cathedra ubi predicabo et verba quae nunquam dixi dicam et prandebimus in una tabula durissima ubi nullus erit nisi nos duo et erit tabula crucis."

²⁸Bernardino of Siena, *Opera omnia*, 2:260. "O caro amantissimi juvenis, a Spiritu Sancto de castissimis visceribus Virginis Matris artificiose concepta, quomodo divulsa et dilacerata."

²⁹Menot, *Sermons choisis*, 491, 493: "... corpus Christi erat excellentissime complexionatum, quia etiam formatum ex puro sanguine virginis et ideo tenerrimum."

to proclaim that Mary too had suffered physically along with her son. The earliest tradition of the Church had tended to maintain a clear distinction between the bodily pain endured by Jesus and the compassion of soul experienced by his mother as she watched him die, not so the late Middle Ages. Many preachers in the fifteenth century simply assumed the Virgin's ability to participate in her son's bodily suffering and were prepared to see in it another demonstration of her desire to be the mother of sinners as well.

For Gerson, Mary's willingness to suffer, "like a good mother for her children,"³⁰ demonstrated the true strength of her maternal love for all of her children in grace. In his famous Passion sermon, "Ad deum vadit," Gerson has Mary cry out to God at the cross:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken the flesh which was taken from me with such holiness and purity, conceived and born from the overshadowing and work of the Holy Spirit? I suffer in it. Since it is one flesh with mine, its grief comes back to me. As of old, sin passed by woman to man, thus the grief of man returns to me, a woman; and by it I purchase and buy back the sin of Eve. And I am willing to suffer, since this pleases God. I consent that I be in some small way a partner and cause of redemption for the human race. And considering this, my grief and even greater grief pleases me if God wills to send it.³¹

In this passage, Gerson adds a new twist to the familiar reference to Mary as the Second Eve. Already in the second century, Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyons described Mary as a

³⁰Gerson, *Oeuvres complètes*, 7:510. "Escoutez, devotes gens, l'amoureuse offre de Nostre Dame. Pensez que pour nous, comme bonne mere pour sen enfans, elle veult payer l'amende si celle de son Fils ne suffisoit; comme elle suffisoit bien pour cent mille mondes racheter."

³¹Gerson, *Oeuvres complètes*, 7:510. "Mon Dieu, mon Dieu pourquoy as tu deguerpi la precieuse chair qui tres saintement et tres purement fu de moy prinse, conceue et enfantee par l'abumbration et operation du Saint Esprit? Je souffre en elle. Comme elle est une chair avecques la mienne, sa douleur redescend en moy, Comme jadis le peche passa par la femme a l'homme, ainsi la douleur de l'homme rechiet sur moy, femme, par quoy je compare et achete le forfait d'Eve. Et je le veul puisqu'ainsi plaist a Dieu estre fait. Bien me consens que je soie aucunement parcionnere et cause de la redempcion de tout l'humain lignage. Et a ceste consideracion me plaist bien ma douleur, et plus grande, si Dieu me la veult envoyer."

new Eve, whose obedience to the will of God allowed her to reverse the curse of sin introduced by Eve's disobedience in the Garden of Eden. What is new in Gerson is his characteristic emphasis on the Virgin as the source of Jesus' humanity and the ability which this gives her "in some small way" to be a partner in the redemption.

In a similar fashion, Bernardino of Busti has Mary call to Jesus himself, "Draw me to you so that I might die with you. Make me die with you since I bore you for death . . . hear my prayer. Receive me onto your cross so that as we lived in one flesh, we might die with one death."³² Bernardino of Busti had discovered in Nicholas of Lyra a passage which enabled him to erase the boundaries between soul and body altogether. He could now assume that any pain of compassion which Mary may have experienced in her soul would inevitably extend to her body. Nicholas had stated that Mary's suffering was greater than that of any of the martyrs,

because the grief of passion begins with a wound to the flesh, felt by the senses, and then overflows into the soul. But the grief of compassion arises and begins in the soul and overflows into the senses and flesh. . . . Therefore since the soul is more powerful and more dominant over the flesh, and the flesh is more delicate and subject to the soul, the overflowing from soul to body is much greater.³³

It was Caroline Walker Bynum's path-breaking study of late medieval women's spirituality, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, which argued that wherever there is a desire to magnify the importance of the body in the spiritual life, there is a corre-

³²Bernardino of Busti, *Martiale*, Sermon 1, "On the Passion," pt. 1. "Trahe me ad te ipsum ut ipsa moriar tecum. . . . fac ut moriar tecum, quia te ad mortem genui. Sine matre noli mori. Recognosce me miseram et exaudi precem mean . . . In tuo me suscipe patibulo ut quam una carne vivimus: una morte pereamus."

³³Bernardino of Busti, *Martiale*, Sermon 1, "On the Sorrows of Mary," pt. 1. "Quia dolor passionis oritur a lesione carnis cum perceptione sensus; et redundat in anima. Dolor vero compassionis oritur et incipit in anima et redundat in sensum et carnem. Quanta igitur anima est potentior et magis dominans super carnem et caro delicatior et magis subiecta anime; tanto fit maior redundantia."

sponding tendency to avoid the usual language of dichotomy between body and soul. Such a spirituality would prefer instead to emphasize not only the harmony of body and soul, but also would tend to blur the boundaries often perceived to exist between the two. Bynum points out that this trait appears in the writing of a number of medieval women mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen and St. Catherine of Siena.³⁴ It therefore would seem perfectly natural for fifteenth-century preachers to conclude that if it were necessary for Christ to suffer in both body and soul for the salvation of sinners, the same would be true of Mary, who would participate in their salvation so closely through her intercessory prayer. Because these men perceived no absolute boundary separating body and soul, Mary could be understood to suffer physical pain at the cross not in addition to, but because of, the sword which pierced her heart.

Having once given birth to the Savior and having suffered alongside him at Calvary, Mary was now prepared to become, after her son, the chief intercessor for sinners in heaven. As on earth, her body in heaven, now glorified through the Assumption, will continue to be linked to her intercessory power. Perhaps the most enthusiastic and joyful treatment of Mary's Assumption comes from the sermons of San Bernardino of Siena. He, like most preachers, believes that Mary's body was assumed into heaven primarily because of her role in the Incarnation. His sermon for the Thursday after Easter, "On the Exceedingly Wonderful Grace and Glory of the Mother of God," functions as a compendium of virtually all the major themes linking Mary as the provider of Christ's humanity with her ability to serve as the mediator of all graces. San Bernardino questions whether God could allow that body which had provided the human body of Christ to perish in the earth. Since this possibility would be unthinkable, he asserts that "as the Lord did not give his holy one, that is Christ, to see corruption, the same is true for the holy one from whom he was born, but she was

³⁴Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 264-265.

assumed with her body and soul into heaven”³⁵ where she was welcomed by the Trinity. God greeted her arrival saying,

“Come most beloved wife, mother and daughter. Enter the garden of delights.” She was then introduced into the inaccessible secret and to the delight of the divine persons in the midst of the blessed Trinity. The Virgin was crowned above the angels, so that she might be fully raised within the glory of the Trinity, and that she might love, seize, sense and enjoy the glory of the blessed Trinity more than any other pure creature likewise assumed, and after the Son, the whole universe is made a partner to her glory.³⁶

Mary’s Assumption, like the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ, is here portrayed as a foretaste of what all Christians might hope to experience. Also, Mary’s reception into heaven by the Trinity is, for San Bernardino, a singularly appropriate reward for the Mother of God: “that a woman would conceive and bear God is and was the miracle of miracles. And thus I might say that it was fitting for that woman to be elevated to a kind of divine equality through her nearly infinite perfection of graces.”³⁷

These ideas are certainly echoed and developed by other late medieval preachers, even if few can equal San Bernardino’s eloquence. Gabriel Barletta declares that Mary excels the angels and saints in her degree of familiarity with God. Addressing Mary with the *Ave*, he says, “the Lord is with you. . . . Because in your womb he was conceived.” This is why the Church can refer to Mary as “the noble dining chamber of the whole Trinity.” There have been many miraculous events throughout history, from the creation, to Noah’s preservation

³⁵Bernardino of Siena, *Opera omnia*, 2:155-56. “Nam sicut non dedit Dominus Sanctum suum, id est Christum, videre corruptionem, sic nec Sanctam suam, de qua natus est Sanctus; sed corpore et anima in caelum assumpta est.”

³⁶Bernardino of Siena, *Opera omnia*, 2:396. “Veni dilectissima sponsa, mater et filia, ingredere hortum deliciarum, ad inaccessibile secretum et ad delectamentum divinarum personarum in medium Trinitatis beatissimae introducta. . . . Virgo super angelos coronatur, ut intra Trinitatis gloriam ipsa sola amplius sit evecta ac plus beatissimae Trinitatis diligat gloriam, capiat, sentiat et fruatur, quam omnis alia pura creature simul sumpta, de cuius gloria post filium participant universi.”

³⁷Bernardino of Siena, *Opera omnia*, 2:381.

on the ark, to Israel's liberation from Egypt. "But," he says, "the work of the Incarnation of Christ exceeds all those great deeds, because it was accomplished, and because he dwelled within Mary."³⁸ And in words similar to those of San Bernardino, Bernardino of Busti concludes that the Virgin has a particular relationship to the Trinity.

... the Blessed Virgin has no one above her besides the three persons of the Trinity. But below her she has the three ranks of those who are being saved: that is virgins, the continent and the married. And she herself is placed in the middle, joining and uniting those three ranks to the Blessed Trinity.³⁹

It is small wonder that the people of late medieval Europe would turn to the Virgin as their supreme patron in heaven when they were so often exposed to sermons such as this. It is also not surprising that Marian relics and shrines were extremely popular, for they had the ability to give Christians a sense of physical closeness to the one whose womb had contained "heaven and earth in little space."⁴⁰

* * *

While late medieval preachers may all have agreed regarding the essential link between Mary's bodily connection with Christ and her power as intercessor, the religious climate of Europe was already beginning to change by the late fifteenth century in ways that would result both in a profound alteration in the portrayal of Mary within the Catholic tradition and in the birth of new religious movements which would break with the historic Church altogether. The impact of this for Marian

³⁸Barletta, *Sermones quadragesimales*, 54v-55r.

³⁹Bernardino of Busti, *Martiale*, Sermon 1, "On the Name of Mary," pt. 3: "... sic beata virgo non habet supra se nisi tres in trinitate personas. Sed infra se habet tres status salvandorum, scilicet, virgines, continentes, et coniugatos. Et ipsa est in medio constituta coniungens et uniens illos tres status beatissime trinitati."

⁴⁰The quotation is from an anonymous 15th-century English carol. The text of the chorus and first verse reads, "There is no rose of swych vertu as is the rose that bare Jhesu; Alleluya. For in this rose conteynyd was Heuen and erthe in Iytyl space, Res miranda."

spirituality will be a greater tendency to exalt the Virgin's spiritual motherhood of Christ, while downplaying the significance of her physical conception of Jesus in the Incarnation; and it will all but eliminate any sense of bodily unity between the two throughout the earthly ministry of Christ.

I have argued elsewhere that this upheaval in religious sensibility can be attributed to a number of complex factors including, but not necessarily limited to, the growth of literacy and the mental habits fostered by literacy following the invention of printing around 1450, changing confessional practices which also developed within individual Christians a greater sense of self-awareness and introspection, and increasing attempts by clerical and secular political leaders to monitor and control the beliefs and actions of European Christians.⁴¹

The question I would like to address at this point is the relevance of the late medieval perspective on Mary within the broader history of the Church. What theological and spiritual purposes did it serve and what, therefore, might have been lost, at least by some, during the storm of protest and reform in the sixteenth century.

From the beginning, one of the most crucial aspects of theological reflection on Mary has been the obvious awareness that her bodily conception and birth-giving of Christ are a witness to the reality of the Incarnation and therefore to all of the resulting implications of the Incarnation for the relationship between the material and spiritual worlds, for the ability of the material to serve as a gateway to the spiritual world and in some way to facilitate participation in it. In the earliest centuries of the Church, Mary's motherhood of Jesus served as a bastion against the threat of Gnostic dualism which sought to deny the real humanity of Christ, preferring instead a Jesus who only appeared to be human.⁴² In a similar fashion, devotion to the relics of the saints was one way of asserting the truth of the resur-

⁴¹Ellington, *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul*, 142-243. The entire second half of the book is an attempt to explore the effect of these social factors on the Marian spirituality of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

⁴²Graef, *Mary*, 1:49-52. See also Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 46-52.

rection of the body, one part of the revolution described by Peter Brown in *The Cult of the Saints*, a revolution wrought by Christianity when it finally triumphed over traditional Greco-Roman religion. Heaven and earth could be joined at the tomb of the martyr, because, through the power of the Incarnation, the body could now participate in the redemption.⁴³ Whether opposing the Gnostics in the second century, Manichaeans in the fourth, or the Albigensians in the thirteenth, the Church's proclamation of the historical birth of Christ from the Virgin continued to offer the alternative of a God who affirms the goodness of the created world by joining himself to it. This is the major reason why the richness of medieval devotion to Mary has generally created a spirituality which expects to encounter the presence and power of God in the most humble and seemingly earthbound objects, the human body of Jesus, water, oil, bread and wine. San Bernardino of Siena drew this logical connection between Mary as the provider of Christ's humanity and the presence of that humanity in the Eucharist. Indeed, since Christ is the source of all the sacraments, he concluded, Mary can be portrayed as their ultimate provider. He said, "For from the flesh of the blessed Virgin and in the part of her body that was taken from her, the whole glory and weight of the sacraments of the Church of God consists, is perfected, and reaches its end."⁴⁴ This intimate connection between Mary, the Incarnation and the sacraments is also why the Marian devotion of the late Middle Ages would not likely be the primary catalyst, in any direct sense, of the dramatic changes soon to transform the religious life of Europe.

⁴³Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 1-22. Brown traces here the transformation in thought when categories that for centuries had been considered separate by the ancient world were joined by Christians through devotion to the saints. Heaven and earth had been joined in the person of the martyred saint; the body had been incorporated into the notion of salvation; and tomb and altar were joined as Christians worshiped at the shrines of the saints whose relics were at times carried through the streets in public processions.

⁴⁴Bernardino of Siena, *Opera omnia*, 2:380. "De carne enim Virginis benedictae et in parte corporis eius excisa consistit, perficitur et terminatur totium decus et pondus sacramentorum Ecclesiae Dei."

To be sure, there was much that needed to be reformed; and anyone interested in some of the more suspect practices of late medieval religious life has no scarcity of historians ready to provide examples.⁴⁵ The overall goal of much of the reform, however, whether among Catholic Christian humanists such as Erasmus, or among more radical Protestants, was not simply the elimination of abuses. It was almost to completely dismantle the outward forms by which late medieval Christians had expressed their faith and to drive a wedge once more between the material and spiritual worlds. Of course, at the heart of many of these objectionable practices was devotion to Mary, to her relics and shrines. Many Protestants also went so far as to deny the sacraments themselves to be means of grace. In such an intellectual climate, it became gradually more difficult to portray anything material as holy, as having an ability to mediate grace or the presence of God.

To be sure, the Catholic Church was spared the most extreme effects of these assaults on historic religious practices, because of continued adherence to its established traditions. It is also true that some of the more conservative Protestant churches retained a strong sense of the sacramental. Nevertheless, even Catholic preachers of the sixteenth century often preferred to stress the greater significance of Mary's spiritual motherhood of Jesus, emphasizing her faith and obedience rather than her bodily conception of him at the Annunciation, as part of the Church's teaching, even as they continued to defend devotion to Mary and to all the saints.

⁴⁵See, e.g., Carlos M. N. Eire, *War against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 8-27. One might also look to some of the more extreme practices of religious women in the late Middle Ages, as depicted by Caroline Walker Bynum in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, for examples of behavior that likely needed to change. See Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 150-186. Of course, the classic critique of late medieval piety has always been that of Johann Huizinga. While the overall tone of the entire book is critical, he especially points out what he considers to be the "mechanical" multiplication of devotions in the late Middle Ages. Most recent historians, however, have been busy recovering a sense of the richness and beauty of some of the very things seen by Huizinga to be sterile. See Johann Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages: A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought and Art in France and the Netherlands in the XIVth and XVth Centuries*, trans. F. Hoffman (London: Arnold, 1924), 154-156.

In closing, it might be possible to argue that one practice of popular Marian devotion, the Rosary, not only acted as a significant bridge between the late medieval and early modern periods but also might in some sense be considered a partner in some of the movement toward a more introspective spirituality. In saying the Rosary, a physical object (the Rosary beads) is used, but the chief purpose of the practice is the creation of a more inward and contemplative prayer life. Those who championed its use often did so for just this reason.⁴⁶

The first Rosary confraternities were founded in the late fifteenth century.⁴⁷ It is not unusual then to find preachers of the day encouraging their congregations to say the Rosary, or simply the *Ave*'s, as a way of honoring the Virgin and of procuring her prayers to God on their behalf. Gabriel Barletta advocates saying both the Office of the Virgin and the Rosary when his hearers find themselves in "difficulties and dangers," advising them not to let the name of Mary be absent from their mouths or their hearts.⁴⁸ According to Bernardino of Busti, saying the Rosary brings "blessed comfort" to sinners, for "we have been made sons of the Virgin and consequently, as by a good mother, we are comforted by her." Indeed he attributes more than comfort to saying the Rosary. These prayers can also bring "a blessed accumulation of spiritual gifts, graces and merits."⁴⁹ It is possible that San Bernardino of Siena may have had the Rosary in mind when he told his hearers with his usual enthusiasm, "The glorious Virgin Mary is a most courteous queen, . . . If you devotedly say to her 'Ave Maria' a thousand times a day, she will greet you a thousand times in return."⁵⁰

Since it is likely that widespread use of the Rosary was instrumental in helping to create the more inward-looking piety

⁴⁶Ellington, *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul*, 33-34, 226-28; Anne Winston-Allen, *Stories of the Rose: The Making of the Rosary in the Middle Ages* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 29-30.

⁴⁷Winston-Allen, *Stories of the Rose*, 24-25.

⁴⁸Barletta, *Sermones quadragesimales*, 17r.

⁴⁹Bernardino of Busti, *Martiale*, Sermon 1, "On the Coronation of Mary," pt. 3.

⁵⁰Bernardino of Siena, *Opera omnia*, 2:154. "Est enim curialissima regina gloriosa virgo Maria, nec potest salutaris sine resalutatione miranda. Si mille 'Ave Maria' dicis devote in die, millies a Virgine resalutaris."

of the early modern period, this would in part account for the Rosary's continuing popularity during a time in which some of the more traditional religious practices such as devotion to pilgrimages and relics began somewhat to decline. In discussing the Rosary, however, we do return, in a sense, to the place where we began, because the central prayer of the Rosary, the *Ave Maria*, is nothing if not a constant reminder of the Incarnation, of the fact that the Virgin to whom one prays is the one in whom, in Gerson's words, "the bread of life, the bread of the angels was made and formed."

In order to maintain a proper understanding of the sacramental, as well as to preserve the profound sense of mystery perceived by the late Middle Ages with regard to the Incarnation, it would seem that the Church must retain at least the chief focal point of late medieval Marian devotion: the essential connection between the flesh of the Virgin, the body of Christ formed at the Incarnation, and the sacramental nature of the Christian faith which flows from them. As a result of her faith and through "grace and charity," Mary became the spiritual mother of Christ; but she also became the one whose flesh was given to be formed into the body of the Son of God, who is himself the supreme sacrament and source of all graces. And so it is not simply that the two gifts were better than one; but that in this one instance, the two gifts became inescapably and forever joined.